

Moran: Washington Street businesses try to keep a built-in customer base



Waukegan officials help cut the ribbon on Get Laced, one of the new small businesses in what has been defined as the Washington Street Corridor west of the Waukegan Ravine. (City of Waukegan)



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Twice a day on every weekday between late August and early June, the commercial strip on Washington Street in Waukegan around Jackson Street is flooded with the arrival and departure of literally hundreds of potential consumers: the 1,600 students at Waukegan High School's Washington campus.

And it's not just the high school students — and staff members — who might have a dollar or two to spend on a beverage or a bite to eat. It's also family members who might be swinging through the area to drop off or pick up those who aren't walking or riding a bus. In fact, the same is true for the parents of 788 students at Robert Abbott Middle School a block to the west and the 800 Miguel Juarez Middle School students two blocks north.

When it came time for city officials and local merchants to take a marketing study — specifically, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's City of Waukegan Washington Street Commercial Corridor Plan — and start turning its concepts into realities, consultant Dan Persky said keeping this built-in audience from fleeing the scene was high on the list.

"In the CMAP plan, they identified the teenage market as critical," said Persky, managing director of Town Square Consultancy. "We wanted to create strategies to make the Washington Street Corridor even more welcoming because schools really do clear out after closing time. We wanted to make sure (students) have positive places to go to."

Or, as Persky put it, to make sure that the business district includes "positive loitering spaces."

As mentioned in this space back in November, the CMAP study focused on a stretch of Washington between the ravine on the east and McAree Road/Keller Avenue on the west. The 66-page document offered recommendations to pump up economic activity in the area, from creating safer crosswalks to improving the quality of signage to raising the area's marketing profile.

"Many people are unfamiliar with what is already available on Washington Street," the report states. "Businesses along the corridor face other challenges that may compound these problems. There is little communication or coordination between businesses, and many business owners lack proper training necessary to improve and grow their business."

Persky's firm was hired by the city for around \$18,000 to meet with business owners and implement strategies. One direct result, he said, is the formation of an organization dubbed the Merchants and Neighbors of Washington Street, which, as the name implies, is a collection of mom-and-pop store owners and everyone else invested in a specific segment between the ravine and Lewis Avenue.

"We really wanted to see buy-in from the merchants, (and) we found they were very interested in implementation," he said, adding that there are 67 businesses in that sector under 27 categories. There are a lot of restaurants in the mix — at least 10 of them — but there are also travel agencies, law firms, financial institutions, barber shops and salons, among others.

According to Persky, more than 30 business owners have been involved in the new merchants' association, meeting monthly for the last five months to review such approaches as marketing themselves on social media.

One tangible result of getting the CMAP recommendations into action was rehabilitation of a city-owned parking lot on the northwest corner of Washington and Butrick Street, which the plan noted had a lack of "obvious signage indicating that it can be used by visitors free of charge, likely contributing to why it is underutilized during much of the day and evening."

According to a city official, signage is among the improvements, and the lot itself has been resurfaced to take out a huge divot that made it look and feel less than appealing even to those who knew it was a free off-street parking option.

Perhaps most importantly, Persky also pointed to recent ribbon-cuttings at West Coast Treats, described on its Facebook page as a community juice shop and gaming center, and Get Laced, which Persky called a "trendy clothing store" geared to a young clientele.

The important point here is that both storefronts are less than a block down from the Washington Street campus and the aforementioned hundreds of students coming in and out of the neighborhood during the school year. If you've ever been at the intersection of Washington and Jackson around 3 p.m. on a school day, you see crowds that any entrepreneur would love to have as a starting point.

All told, we'll take these as positive first steps in the sometimes slow-moving process of translating a glossy study into something that actually pays the freight. Where the Washington Street Corridor goes from here is up to both the businesses and the residents who have them as an option.

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